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The Vocalized Tone

Abstract: One of the oldest features of jazz performance, and one of the most enduring tropes in jazz criticism, is that of the “vocalized tone.” At least since the turn of the twentieth century, a great many musicians, especially wind players, have developed techniques that make their instrumental sound more “vocal,” more “human.” Why? For some commentators, the vocalized tone harks back to the workings of African languages, musics, and performance practices; for others the collapsed distinction between voice/instrument, or person/object, articulates a critique of the Western liberal subjecthood that African Americans, whose ancestors were taken across the Atlantic as commodities, could never fully attain. This chapter evaluates these and other theoretical approaches, testing them against historical jazz practices and aesthetic discourses.

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The Vocalized Tone

Tom Perchard

By 1956, Leonard Bernstein was one of America's most famous musicians and, by dint of his TV lectures, a highly admired public educator. That year, Columbia released one of the conductor's talks on record, under the title *What is Jazz?* For Bernstein as for many other commentators, the answer to that question centered on a set of performance practices: blue notes, the transformation of popular song material through improvisation, and the vocalized instrumental tone. "Jazz would not be jazz without its special tonal colors," the conductor says. "These colors are many, but they mostly stem from the qualities of the Negro singing voice." By way of proof, Bernstein compares two recorded excerpts of a Louis Armstrong performance, one sung, the other played, but voice and trumpet indistinguishable in their phrasing and treatment. Perhaps even more than the trumpet, the jazz saxophone for Bernstein—"breathy, a little hoarse, with a vibrato or tremor in it"—showed most clearly this characteristic relationship between the music and an imagined black vocality.

Bernstein was describing a jazz practice of long pedigree. The manipulation of pitch and timbre, the instrumental imitation of the vocal, had been for decades what identified jazz as "hot," and often, as black; "sweet," commercial dance bands, often white, tended to downplay those tonalities even as they incorporated other jazz features (this racial distinction will be explored below). In the 1920s and 1930s, brass players had mastered the use of plunger and wah-wah mutes, with hand and mute shaping and reshaping the horn's aperture like a mouth shapes words, a talking effect resulting. Several of those musicians were identified with the Duke Ellington orchestras: trumpeters Bubber Miley and Cootie Williams, trombonists Tricky Sam

Nanton and, later, Quentin Jackson. Into the 1940s, the breathy growl of saxophonists like Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster, or the ecstatic shriek of Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, could be equally suggestive of human vocal equipment, as was the half-valve technique of trumpeters like Rex Stewart, Dizzy Gillespie, and, by the end of the 1950s, Lee Morgan. John Coltrane’s model, an important part of which was a highly vocalized sound, became globally influential from the early 1960s onwards, entrenching a particular idea of sonic vocality for decades. All of this attested to a broader tradition of vocalized instrumental performance in African American music, and the important principle of what has been called “the moan within the tone” (Miller 1995).

It should be noted at the outset that this set of expressive techniques both embodied and concealed ideas around gender. Lara Pellegrinelli (2008) has argued that, while jazz histories have usually positioned blues singing as an important precursor for the music, singers, often women, tend to be excluded from the narrative once “jazz proper” is deemed to have begun; jazz and singing are “separated at birth,” and the music’s subsequent development is described through a succession of innovative “Great Man” instrumentalists. But perhaps rather than “separated” at birth, perhaps the singing voice was merely sublimated; as Pellegrinelli writes, critical interest in the voice has often been shifted sideways, to the vocalized instrument, the vocal ignored in favor of its simulation and yet still in some way taken as signifying a musician’s “natural,” personal qualities. For complex reasons, the professional worlds of jazz instrumental performance have often been profoundly exclusionary, and so the history of the vocalized instrument can be seen as doubly or even triply gendered: in the first instance, because of a longstanding male hegemony in instrumental practice; in the second, because of the supposedly “masculine” qualities usually imputed to vocalizing effects (roughness, harshness, hoarseness); and finally, in the continual re-narration and consolidation of that male-dominated historical tradition (in which, its critical intent aside, this piece participates).¹

Twenty-first century players like saxophonists Matana Roberts and Ingrid Laubrock show that vocalizing techniques came to characterize players of whatever gender subjectivity, cultural background, or geographical origin. Nevertheless, for many musicians and commentators,

instrumental vocalization has been suggestive of some deeper meaning or value system original to an implicitly masculine but often explicitly black American experience. In this chapter, I will examine why this might have been so. I will also survey the broader musical tradition of vocal-instrumental blurring so that more recent theoretical work, some of which emerges outside jazz scholarship per se, might extend what have to date been somewhat truncated critical interpretations of the practice. As is already becoming clear, at stake in the vocalized tone was a complex of ideas around race, the self, and the body: ideas that, across the history of jazz and indeed modernity in general, could be articulated in celebration or in fear.

“The Negro Singing Voice”

Before thinking about what it meant to transpose the vocal to the instrumental, we need to identify those qualities apparently special to “the Negro singing voice” that Bernstein evoked. Wrapped in the idealized timbres and intensities of this voice was both mystery and possibility. “The” black voice was thought and portrayed by African Americans and others as unusual not just in its sound, but also in its ability to bear and express a history of oppression, and that history’s transcendence. It was exceptional in its ambiguous pitching between joy and sorrow; it articulated a humanity in music that was denied in law.

These ideas would endure into the twenty-first century, but they were fully formed by the middle of the nineteenth. In a much-cited passage on plantation singing from 1845, Frederick Douglass (1817–1895), formerly enslaved but latterly a figurehead of the abolition movement, recalled that “every tone” sounded “a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions of the dehumanizing character of slavery” (Southern 1983, 83–84). The notion that a quality of voice could form a bulwark against adversity was later taken up by W.E.B. Du Bois, the black sociologist whose book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) would become one of the central works of the American century. Each chapter of this ruminative study of black American existence is

headed by a fragment of music and verse taken from the spirituals or, as Du Bois calls them, the “sorrow songs.” “Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely,” Du Bois writes. “They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine” (Du Bois 2007 [1903], 167).

For Du Bois, sorrow songs gave pre-linguistic access to the history of the race, sounding and meaning with purpose to those that shared in that history. And perhaps to those that did not: many nineteenth-century travel writers, memoirists, and folklorists had recorded their first impressions of a black vocality that, especially in its plaintive mode, often astonished. Ronald Radano has argued that these white commentators “attributed to African American musical creativity unique qualities of performance,” notably a vocal expressivity that exceeded the powers of whites. “Difference,” Radano continues, “thus becomes key to figuration of black music, assigning a status of exception that gives African Americans a source of racialized power” (Radano 2003, 229). This difference was repeatedly ascribed, yet always mutable, as Nina Sun Eidsheim notes in her consideration of a vocal “sonic blackness”; this she defines as “not the unmediated sound of essential otherness or the sound of a distinct phenotype” but as the following:

a combination of interchangeable self-reproducing modes: a perceptual phantom projected by the listener; a vocal timbre that happens to match current expectations about blackness; or the shaping of vocal timbre to match current ideas about the sound of blackness.

(Eidsheim 2011, 663–664)

Those ideas, that vocalized difference and exceptionalism, were to be seen being reproduced in popular commentaries like Bernstein’s lecture, in scholarly texts like Eileen Southern’s 1971 landmark *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (Southern 1997 [1971]), and, much more importantly, amid innumerable lived, performed experiences. Into the twenty-first century,

African American vocal traditions have remained a vital site of cultural definition, participation, and historical witness, observable and meaningful to those both in and outside that cultural group (Griffin 2004). Whatever form it has taken across jazz's global history, it is to this phenomenon that instrumental vocality owes much of its critical weight and centrality even if, as I will argue later, that association obscures the practice's other origins and motives.

The Voice as Bearer of Individual Identity

It was not just cultural difference that would be marked by the imagined black voice, but also individual difference, and here we return to this chapter's main concern. As we have already seen, in jazz practices emerging from the early twentieth century, various "non-standard" playing techniques were applied, particularly to wind instruments, in the effort to imitate or index the human voice. These techniques became central to jazz's culture and printed critical discourses, the latter of which, not coincidentally, began to take shape as did a new kind of star player, one who had stepped out of early jazz's collective improvisation to take extended, virtuosic solo flights. Increasingly detailed press coverage of increasingly numerous "name" jazz instrumentalists helped develop a new kind of connoisseurship for the music, and this centered on the identification and appreciation of a musician's personalized approach (Perchard 2015, 20–53).

For many serious fans, writers, and musicians, an individuated instrumental sound was not just a fillip or trademark, but the soul made audible; along with the improvised musical thought, it was the guarantor of an expressive authenticity unique to jazz.² The French organizer, discographer, and critic Charles Delaunay wrote in 1939 that, in this music,

what we could call the interior note, that's to say the note felt by the artist and the note emitted by the instrument, can only be one. A single and same vibration must run through the musician, from his heart to the bell of his instrument. His whole being primed, one can say he becomes the horn. This explains in part the

preference of jazz musicians for wind instruments . . . jazz is a form of expression that is direct, total and definitive.

([Delaunay 1939](#), 71)

It was not surprising that this instrumental “vocality” could be heard as sounding the player’s authentic self: as numerous intellectual historians have described and twentieth-century thinkers like Jacques Derrida have critiqued, this notion has been present in Western thought and culture for millennia. According to this “phonocentric” way of thinking, expression that is judged most true is that which is not mediated by distance, time, or any kind of writing. Speech and the voice come to signify the unproblematic expression of an interior self, because they are uniquely present in one place, communicating directly from that subject to its audience; expression mediated by writing, however, is apt to be interpreted differently from reader to reader, especially if those readers hail from contexts removed by time or place from the speaking subject’s own. The speaking, present subject can only ever be itself, but writing is mutable, detached from and exceeding its originating thought. Speech is reality; writing is its representation. **3**

If this sounds rather abstract, then it’s worth noting that more than a few early commentators on jazz praised the music in similar terms. For them, a supposedly played-out repertoire of old composed classical music could no longer speak to modern experience, but jazz, this direct, vital, putatively oral form, emphatically did ([Panassié 1942](#)). And if it has become common to look for ways in which African American participants have skirted or undercut those cultural assumptions basic to normative “Western” culture or thought, then so has the notion of personalized, embodied voice been all-important in African American cultural worlds. Cheryl [Keyes \(2009\)](#), 19) writes that “in the black sacred context, one associates ‘spirit’ with the manifestation of an intangible being or presence which is often felt, experienced, or made known through its ability to act upon or ability to speak through a living form”; Keyes explicitly stages the instrumental voice as a further (secular) instantiation of this concept.

More to the point, the idea has long underpinned the value system described by jazz musicians themselves. “When I know a man’s sound,” John Coltrane said in 1966, “well, to me that’s him” (Kofsky 1970, 225). “The only thing nobody can steal from you is your sound,” said Coleman Hawkins. “Sound alone is important” (Miller 1995, 159). “The sound of the improvisation seems to tell us what kind of person is improvising,” claimed Yusef Lateef. “We feel that we can hear character or personality in the way the musician improvises” (Lewis 1996, 117). These utterances from the historical jazz literature could be multiplied by the hundreds, and the principle survives into the current century: “every musician finally needs a sound,” writes jazz critic Ben Ratliff (2007, x), “a full and sensible embodiment of his (*sic*) artistic personality, such that it can be heard, at best, in a single note.”

Such statements seem universally applicable. Yet, as we have seen, there has been a longstanding critical desire to conflate a perceived authenticity of expression with a perceived authenticity of racial lineage. Those early advocates for jazz who, in Europe especially, could be eager to take the music as a token of black exceptionalism, sometimes railed against white players like Bix Beiderbecke, whose sound could be judged by a writer like Hugues Panassié as too “honeyed” to embody “the spirit of the Negro musicians,” for that French critic “the only real jazz spirit” (Panassié 1942, 81). Later interventions re-articulated this idea in more sophisticated terms. In his important 1963 book *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones lamented the “dreadful split between life and art” enacted in (white) Western culture, where autonomous art objects were polished up and rendered distant from everyday experience. Such a split, Jones argued, was nowhere to be found in Afro-diasporic culture, as the “hoarse, shrill,” human quality of black American singing and playing showed. For Jones, the playing of a white alto saxophonist like Paul Desmond thus reflected a particularly “European” concern for the aesthetically ideal—and a “clean, round” tone—over human expression; meanwhile Charlie Parker, the critic wrote, “produced a sound on the same instrument that was called by some ‘raucous and uncultivated.’ But Parker’s sound,” Jones continued, “was *meant* to be both those adjectives” (Jones 1963, 29–30).

This radical separation of European/white and African American approaches is reinscribed by Doug [Miller \(1995\)](#), who situates early white American jazz saxophonists like Frankie Trumbauer and Jimmy Dorsey in a Euro-American classical and band tradition which—unlike jazz—required a firm embouchure to ensure “proper” ensemble intonation ([Miller 1995](#), 157). That idea is echoed in George Lewis’s often-repeated definition of “Afrological” and “Eurological” practices, the former black-music-based and centered on improvisation and sounded “notions of personhood,” the latter prioritizing composition and ensemble execution ([Lewis 1996](#), 117). Lewis’s theorization recognizes that successful participation in either mode is owed to learning rather than skin color—and thus can account for vocalizing white players like the cornetist Muggsy Spanier or baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams—yet it does little to challenge what is an enduring binary division of music cultures.⁴ In the Eurological, distinctive voices are seen as belonging to composers, not their executants; in the Afrological, that situation is reversed.

We are moving away from those imitative or indexical vocal effects described at the outset and toward a more metaphorical kind of voice, this formed in part by that individuated (and vocalized) sound, but standing for originality more broadly. This understanding of voice, too, soon became unassailable jazz dogma, and one that went far beyond questions of color. “There ain’t no rule saying everybody’s got to deliver the same damn volume or tone,” Billie Holiday was reported as saying:

You can’t copy anybody and end up with anything. If you copy, it means you’re working without any real feeling. And without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing. No two people on earth are alike, and it’s got to be that way in music or it isn’t music.

([Holiday and Dufty 1992 \[1956\]](#), 48)⁵

As these words suggest, little has caused more alarm among jazz commentators than the apparent absence of such a voice, and the perversion of that individualist value. In 1967, the French tenor saxophonist Barney Wilen explained to an interviewer that he had stopped listening to John Coltrane so as to avoid sounding too much like him. “It’s always seemed to me that to imitate Coltrane is a small crime of *lèse-majesté*,” he said. “When Charles Lloyd does it I find it detestable, indecent even” (Ginibre 1967, 28). Paul Berliner’s monumental ethnographic study of jazz musicians (1994) records many criticisms similarly aimed by players at colleagues who had taken on another’s sound without developing their own.

Yet despite universal assent to its basic premise, at some points in jazz’s history the generalized notion of the instrumental voice has become the focus of specific anxieties. In the 1960s, and in the playing of saxophonists like Archie Shepp or Dewey Redman, vocalicity came to characterize “avant-garde” and free jazz saxophone technique to an extent that discomfited many observers—not least that critical fraternity which, composed largely of white men, could hear its roar and scream as the presentation of a newly assertive and confrontational black masculinity. Such was recognized by a comparatively open member of that commentariat, Nat Hentoff, who wrote in 1967:

nearly every jazz breakthrough in the past has first been challenged as being too “intellectual”, too “European”, not “hot” enough. These days, the opponents of what’s happening now seem to be charging that too much emotion is erupting in this music . . . But too much for whom? (Hentoff 1967)

In highly policed press contexts, and under repeated questioning as to whether their tonally intense playing represented an implicitly political “anger,” musicians like Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane were apt to counter that they were aiming for an exploration of sound, or an affective register abstractly described. Something similar can be seen in that Hentoff piece, liner notes for Pharoah Sanders’s Impulse album *Tauhid*. As well as the careful distancing from any idea that the screams and shrieks in his playing related directly to the roiling contemporary struggle for

civil rights and black liberation—a distance, to be sure, that some musicians did not seek—Sanders’s own words are a good example of the by-then venerable notion of vocalized expression as unmediated subjectivity. “I don’t really see the horn anymore,” Sanders told Hentoff.

I’m trying to see myself . . . as to the sounds I get, it’s not that I’m trying to scream on my horn. I’m just trying to put all my feelings into the horn. And when you do that, the notes go away.

And yet the rest of Sanders’s statement suggests that something else was up, too:

By tightening my embouchure, fixing my teeth in certain positions, and overblowing the horn, I was able to make clusters of notes. Why did I want clusters? So that I could get more feeling, more of me, into each note I played.

(Hentoff 1967)

Descriptions of specific technical procedures like this one have been as unusual as descriptions of performed emotion have been common: musicians have rarely felt it useful or appropriate to enter into specialist discussion with their journalist interviewers. But Sanders’s words highlight that, however sacred the dogma of immediacy and pure human expression, it is the process of instrumental *mediation* that is really the point: the challenge has not been to remove the instrument from the equation, not to efface it, but rather to stage it as central—and even then to overcome it by achieving a sounding “personhood.” Any idealist critical meaning is underpinned by material creative endeavor and the inventive manipulation of instrumental resources.

There is, in music, a tradition of comment to this end. In his remarkable 1930 recording *Playing My Saxophone*, Fess Williams offers a virtuoso display of vocalizing techniques, as well as a vocal refrain that dwells precisely on the operations in question: “going up out of range, flutter-tonguing a note down low/holding high notes a long time, playing my saxophone.” Less

verbally explicit but just as illustrative are those performances by players as varied as Earl Bostic or Peter Evans, in which signifiers of human vocality are piled up on to signifiers of instrumental facility not available to the voice—wide interval leaps, rapid arpeggiation—such as to focus attention on the ambiguous status of the sounding metal. As Richard Middleton has written (1990, 264), this is a traditional African American dialectic, in which “the often noted importance of ‘vocalized tone’ is only part of a wider development in which ‘instrumental’ and ‘vocal’ modes meet on some indeterminate ground.”

We will return to that idea. But moving toward a conclusion, I want to explore how this complex of cultural identity, individual subjectivity, and instrumental (im)mediation has been accounted for—that is, how the practice’s origins have been explained, its meanings interpreted—in academic literature of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first century. This will lead us to some new thoughts about those origins, and to some considerations of the ways we interpret jazz history more generally.

Theorizing the Vocalized Tone

It has been common for scholars to locate the vocalized tone’s origins amid a loosely defined “African” heritage. In his much-read (if problematic) 1971 study, *Black Talk*, Ben Sidran identified that sound and a “peculiarly ‘black’ approach to rhythm” as Afro-diasporic music’s “essential” elements; these features, he argued, extended an African oral culture and reflected “the greater oral ability to lend semantic significance to tonal elements of speech . . . The manner in which drums were used to ‘talk’ is typical of this communication mode” (Sidran 1995 [1971], 6–7). Later musicological work followed in this vein. Portia K. Maultsby (2005, 333–334), wrote that:

the concept of sound that governs Afro-American music is unmistakably grounded in the African past . . . In Africa and throughout the diaspora, black

musicians produce an array of unique sounds many of which imitate those of nature, animals, spirits and speech . . . Musicians bring intensity to their performances by alternating lyrical, percussive, and raspy timbres; juxtaposing vocal and instrumental textures . . . and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams into the melody.

Maultsby goes on to cite the Cameroonian musician Francis Beby and his assertion that “Western distinctions between instrumental and vocal music are evidently unthinkable in Africa where the human voice and musical instruments ‘speak’ the same language” (334). No doubt there is some truth in some of this, and jazz musicians have long used the image of talk in describing the meaningful instrumental performance. Recalling Sidney Bechet in his autobiography, Duke Ellington described the reeds player “calling” through his “throaty growl,” a common early jazz practice “where people send messages in what they play, calling somebody, or making facts and emotions known” (Ellington 1974, 47).

But we should be suspicious of neat descriptions of such complex musical genealogies. Too many writers on music have sought to pick apart densely interwoven cultural practices by reducing them to separate, identifiable strands, these strands leading directly back to some cultural stock itself reductively identified as African or European. The same can be said for interpretations that, working in the reverse direction, see in such historically enmeshed phenomena the easily legible results of a binary hybridization process; in another piece, Maultsby (1985) positions vocalized jazz performance technique as sounding an “African” adaptation to “European” instruments, one analogous to the supposed adaptation of the tempered, diatonic scale (the mythical origin of the blue note similarly laying in the bending of such Western scales to fit African custom and sensibility).

Alexander Weheliye (2002) offers an interpretation that, while strikingly different and more theoretically nuanced, is nevertheless related to these previous accounts. Weheliye’s study is not of the vocalized instrument, but of the instrumentalized vocal, namely, the vocoder voice found in 1970s and 1980s jazz fusion, R&B, and electro (see also Rollefson 2008). But that

concept has a long history in African American music styles, and from scat singing in the 1910s to auto-tune 100 years later, whether through performance or technological mediation, the conventionally human voice has often been rendered “machine.” Though Weheliye approaches it from the other side, this compact of sounded humanity and technology is no different from that under discussion here; moreover, since it emerges outside a rather too entrenched discourse around the individuated jazz sound, this is a theory that may suggest a new approach to that technique and its meanings.

Making reference to various works from cyborg theory, Weheliye suggests that these practices are owed to a creative questioning of the ideas around “humanity” so important in early conceptions of the black voice. Weheliye writes that the post-Enlightenment, liberal subject has always been defined as a free individual, a person free to think and to act according to his or her own will. However, black subjects present in the “New World” can hardly be expected to simply identify with this concept of selfhood, given the practices and histories of slavery and colonialism which took their ancestors to that place. In addition, while liberal subjecthood has been identified with free will, a rationality that privileges the mind and effaces the body, black peoples of the West have often been identified with their bodies first and foremost: as slave bodies born to work, as sexualized bodies subject to desire, or as entertaining, athletic bodies gifted with putatively exceptional performing powers. This doesn’t mean that what Weheliye calls “Afro-diasporic thinking” has simply rejected ideas of the self-possessed human; instead, that figure is critiqued, its ironized historical contingency underlined, and this often through creative work. It is by dehumanizing and disembodimenting the voice that African Americans have questioned supposedly universal, post-Enlightenment ideas of humanhood, subjectivity, and freedom, showing those things to have been “mutable” and selectively available without rejecting them outright. This is why black music practices have often highlighted rather than concealed “the flow between humans and machines” and the bleed between those categories (Weheliye 2002, 31).

That idea seems easily applicable to the vocalized jazz sound, opening up the possibility that, as much as making their instruments more human, “critical” jazz players might also have been rendering themselves more instrument. Think of the wah-wah mute, one of the quintessential jazz sounds from its introduction in the mid-1920s; then the 1960s wah-wah pedal, designed to provide the same effect for guitarists but at the same time helping usher in a new, electrified sonic agenda for popular music; then think of Miles Davis, who having in the 1950s made his name with a personalized, breathy use of that mute, at the turn of the 1970s introduced the pedal to his amplified setup, adding a layer of technological mediation which, though boldly electro-futuristic, nevertheless rendered his performance more “vocal” than ever before. Notions of the human, the instrument, the voice, and the machine are multiplied and superimposed, the lines between them audibly blurred.

Work emerging from this important and influential discourse around Afro-futurism can show new interpretive possibilities for the creative confusion of voice and technology. But the idea that such confusion might always enact a creative critique of the liberal category of “human” is destabilized when recalling those jazz musicians cited above, who, speaking at different times and from different parts of the jazz tradition, were united and definitive in their identifying of instrumental sound with its maker’s full, authentic subjectivity. There was no problematizing of the “human” by mid-century African American musicians for whom, after all, exceptional musical expression was a public demonstration of the self-possession often denied them in non-musical contexts.

Yet speculative readings like Weheliye’s should not necessarily be subservient to something more narrowly empirical: written and sounding practices are closely intertwined, and criticism can make music meaningful in ways players sometimes can not. Still, an application of Occam’s razor might lead us to work closer to home in seeking progenitors of the humanized jazz instrument (or the instrumentalized jazz human). We need, finally, to properly historicize these practices, to see their uses, performance contexts and critical meanings in flux, if we are to understand them at all: singular, transhistorical, or static interpretations will never tell the whole

story. And that goes as much for those jazz musicians' association of instrumental voice and player subjectivity—surely beholden to a then-hegemonic idea of the Romantic artist—as it does for Weheliye's twenty-first-century critical production.

That is not to reject either interpretations. How could it be: in different ways and to different extents, these meanings have held, been subscribed to, and been “true.” Instead, it is to argue that the problem of the instrumental voice is over-determined, that its origins, and its meanings, are multiple, complex, intertwined, contradictory. So, in the search for a new account of the vocalized tone, I want to close by exploring an important area of musical practice often neglected in jazz historiography, and this means working with a different interpretive strategy. Cultural critics are used to taking extremely seriously the forms for which they act as advocates. But what do we miss if those forms were not always meant to be serious? For decades, the vocalized tone has been made to bear much critical weight, but it may be that an important part of its origin lies in the realm of pleasure and play, and the vaudeville culture that nurtured jazz and blues artists in the first years of the twentieth century.

As vaudeville's commentators have always noted, that form put spectacle and novelty above all. One of the ways that these things were accomplished was in the confusion of categories that is basic to comedy of all kinds. Vaudeville acts often pivoted on the transformation of one thing into another, usually an imagined opposite. So, adults acted as children, men as women, blacks as whites, whites as blacks. The pleasure of the uncanny was central: one of the earliest reports of blues singing on the stage described not a human, but a ventriloquist's dummy, Henry, the “little wooden-headed boy” who could be found touring alongside his human co-star Johnnie Woods in 1909. The distinction between living and inanimate was tested nightly on the vaudeville stage, and often by jazz players: by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's barnyard effects, immortalized on the “first” jazz record, Livery Stable Blues; by the “laughing cornets” of Charles “Doc” Cooke's Syncopated Orchestra; by the definitive, hugely influential “jungle style” of Duke Ellington's talking horns ([Abbott and Seroff 1996](#); [Kenney 1986](#)).

Vaudeville houses were often as segregated as many other American public institutions at the time, but both white and black circuits shared in the “gorgeous variety” of music that Caroline Caffin described in her 1914 essay on the institution. This music ranged “from melody extracted from the unwilling material of xylophones and musical glasses”—those xylophones were sometimes made of skeleton—“through the varying offerings of singers and instrumentalists, both comic and serious, to the performances of high-class chamber music or the singing of an opera diva” (Caffin 1984 [1914], 209; see also Laurie 1953, 63–66).

In Caffin’s observations are two principles that we can finally identify as fundamental to the phenomenon and tradition of the vocalized tone. The first is by now familiar: “melody extracted from unwilling material,” the apparent imbuing of the inanimate with will, with humanity, in the name of creativity and spectacle. But the second lies in that porousness, which Caffin underlines throughout her piece, between “high” and “low” musical materials and practices, a porousness then common in vaudeville and musical life more generally. Just as the stars of musicals and light opera “drift[ed] with apparent indifference from one sphere to the other” (Caffin 1984 [1914], 209), so did those vocalizing musical effects. Just as jazz performance was rooted in novelty and entertainment, so would it quickly prove capable of carrying the most profound meaning.

By way of illustration, let us end as we began, with Louis Armstrong. To Leonard Bernstein and who knows how many others, Armstrong was a conjurer of deep feeling and high comedy, a player whose raucous tonal effects decorated lines that were constructed with the most cultivated ingenuity. But in the insightful analysis of Brian Harker, such a sober appreciation of that cultivation belongs to a later moment in jazz’s cultural progress; what marked jazz’s beginning, and shaped Armstrong’s early playing, was its emergence from a vaudeville tradition that functioned according to an “aesthetic of constant surprise,” a sensibility “that cast individualistic solo gestures as manifestations of novelty” (Harker 2011, 15, 17). Perhaps the primary bearer of such novelty was the vocalizing “gimmick,” the effect that could amount to a personal (and professional) trademark. In the 1910s, a jazz vaudevillian like King Oliver could

be found using his mute to imitate a crying baby, and the New Orleansian Creole Band, as the *Los Angeles Tribune* reported, could wow audiences by making “the very instruments assume new personalities” (Harker 2011, 18–19).

The vocalized tone, then, can be seen as a traditional practice that, from vaudeville to Rhythm and Blues to free jazz and beyond, has been formed of a relatively stable set of technical procedures. But, like all traditions, that formal stability has both begotten and belied a great variety of imaginative and critical meanings, these changing over time according to performance, political, or philosophical context. Vocalized instruments have been played for laughs, but they have also articulated the most deeply felt beliefs. The vocalized tone has spoken of collective belonging, but it has also been the guarantor of highly individuated identity and originality. In this vocal-instrumental sound is a claim to personal, artistic authenticity, and in the self-conscious confusion of musician and instrument a demonstration of the creative relativism that has inspired so much music of African American origin.

Notes

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1 On the gendering of sound, texture, and noise, see [Smith 2008](#). Elsewhere ([Perchard 2015](#), 112–143) I have argued that Miles Davis used various performance breath techniques to construct a sounding “feminine” character in his music for Louis Malle’s film *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud*—and that this construction remained central to his practice and sonic identity for some years.

2 Listeners—often aided by the phonograph—could forge a kind of quasi-intimate identification with instrumentalists as people just as they had begun to with crooners, those singers who exploited new microphone, radio, and phonography technology to sing close and quiet over a full-band backing ([Lockheart 2003](#)).

3 This complex is clearly apparent in Radano’s discussion of nineteenth-century notions of the black voice and the limits of transcription. For a useful discussion of Derridean logocentricity in a jazz improvisation context, see [Moreno \(1999\)](#); for a psychoanalytical take on the same issues, see [Dolar \(2006\)](#).

4 Indeed, the marking and remarking of that division, and the entrenchment of the cultural identities on either side, is at its most fraught when identities are shown to be less discrete than assumed. Laurie [Stras's 2007](#) study of the 1930s vocal trio the Boswell Sisters shows how anxious listeners could be when exceptional “black” voices emanated from evidently white bodies.

5 As Huang and Huang note ([2013](#), 287), many commentators and colleagues remarked upon the intimate connection between speech and music in Holiday’s singing style.